

ISRAEL AND THE KURDS
(1949-1990)

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General

Recently, a group of Israeli experts published the results of a research, based on genetic analysis, which claimed that most of the Jews are distant ethnic relatives of the Kurds. According to the findings of the group led by Ariella Oppenheim of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a genetic connection between Jews and Kurds is more pronounced than connections between Jews and the neighbouring Arabic peoples who, like Jews, speak a Semitic language.

As A. Oppenheim said, previous research had revealed greater genetic similarity between Jews and Arabs, because the DNA analysis of Kurds had not yet been done. She pointed out that genetic affinity of Arabs to Jews may be attributed to the possible admixture of a part of Palestine Arabs with Jews converted to Islam, as genetic similarities between Jews and other Arabs (Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi, etc.) are much less evident.¹

According to the authors, the study was conducted based on all recent advancements in genome mapping with much more precise tools than those available for previous research. The scientists believe that Jews and Kurds descended from a common ancestral population that inhabited the border regions of modern Iraq and Turkey.² At some point in time, some of them had probably migrated southward and had gradually populated the Mediterranean seashore. The authors point at genetic connections of Jews with Kurds and, to lesser extent,

¹ A. Oppenheim, "High-Resolution Y Chromosome Haplotypes of Israeli and Palestinian Arabs Reveal Geographic Substructure and Substantial Overlap with Haplotypes of Jews", *Human Genetics*, N.107 (6), December 2000: 630-641.

² This theory to some extent contradicts the argument supported by linguistic data, namely, that the central parts of Iran are the ethnic territory of the speakers of Kurdish dialects (see G. Asatrian, "Die Ethnogenese der Kurden und frühe kurdisch-armenische Kontakte", *Iran and the Caucasus*, vol. V (2001): 47 et sq.).

with Armenians and Italians, thus arguing that the affinity of Jews to Kurds and Armenians attests the theory the ancestors of Jews lived in the north-eastern Mediterranean region.³

Regardless of its scientific validity, the above research has become yet another example of the special relationships that existed among Jews and Kurds for centuries. For a number of reasons, after the State of Israel was established in 1948, these historical relationships became increasingly important against the backdrop of political developments in the Near and Middle East.

A Brief Historical Survey

The territory of the present day Iraq for centuries has been inhabited by peoples of various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Muslims (Kurds, Turkomans) lived there side by side with Christians (Armenians, Assyrians), Yezidis and Jews. While Kurds, Yezidis, part of the Assyrians and Jews led a nomadic lifestyle in the mountains and made their living by cattle breeding, Armenians and some of the Jews were mostly urban dwellers and were prominently engaged in trade, commerce, finances and public management.⁴

The history of Jewish settlements and the spread of Judaism in the areas currently inhabited by the Kurds, date far back. The Bible says that after the Kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III in 722 B.C., part of the captive Jews resettled in Media, Assyria, and Mesopotamia. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II together with the Medians destroyed the Assyrian Empire. After he had conquered Judaea, many Jews were deported to Babylon and the surrounding areas. The Babylonian Jews remained in touch with their compatriots in Israel and later assisted them in their struggle against Rome by supplying arms. During the Roman occupation the Jews of Babylon rose against the Emperor Trajan, and were ruthlessly suppressed by his general Lucius Quietus. Under the Parthian and Persian rule, the Jews of Babylon enjoyed internal autonomy.

³ A. Oppenheim, "The Y Chromosome Pool of Jews as Part of the Genetic Landscape of the Middle East", *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, N.69 (5), November 2001: 1095-1112; also T. Traubman, "Study Finds Close Genetic Connections Between Jews and Kurds", *Ha'aretz*, 21 November 2001.

⁴ M. Galletti, "Kurdistan: A Mosaic of People", *G. Asatrian (ed.), Acta Kurdica*, Curzon Press, vol.1, 1994: 43.



A Kurdish Jew
(Asia Magazine, vol. 36, 1937)

According to Roman and Greek sources, following the invasion of Palestine by the Armenian king Tigran the Great II in 83-77 B.C., a large number of Jews were deported to the southern regions of the Armenian plateau adjacent to Northern Mesopotamia. There, they were resettled in Tigranakert, the new capital of Armenia, founded by Tigran the Great on the upper Tigris.⁵ Later, they also settled south of Tigranakert, in Northern Mesopotamia.

The Jewish rabbis preached among the local population, trying to convert them to Judaism. Their efforts did not go unrewarded, and already very early in the Common Era, most of the city of Irbil (Erbil) had been converted to Judaism, including, according to the Talmud, the ruling Adiabene dynasty. As the legend says, among the first to proselytise were King Monobazes, his wife Helena, and his son and successor Izates.⁶ Many modern Jewish historians believe that the Adiabene dynasty was Jewish by the middle of the 1st century B.C. At any rate, it seems indisputable that by the beginning of the A.D., Judaism was firmly established in the areas presently populated by Kurds.

Like many other Jewish communities in the East, Adiabene too, in early in the Common Era proved to be receptive to Christian conversion. Despite that, Jews remained here as a significant ethnic group until the middle of the 20th century and the creation of the State of Israel.

⁵ See in detail H. Manandian (Manandyan), *Tigran II-ə ew Hromə*, Erevan, 1940: *passim*.

⁶ L. Gindzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1968: 412; cf. also S. Grayzel, *A History of the Jews*, New York, 1968: 163.

The Jews from the Kurdish-speaking areas of Mesopotamia are referred to by several names: Kurdish Jews, the Jews of Zakho, or Assyrian Jews.

At home and in the synagogue, the language of the Jews of this region was a form of Aramaic, while outside these they spoke Kurdish. Even having lived in Israel for almost half a century, some Kurdish Jews have still preserved Aramaic as their spoken language. Attempts are even made to revive the Jewish Aramaic dialect.⁷ Some small Arabic-speaking Jewish communities, such as the community of Nisebin, for instance, are also believed to belong to the Kurdish Jews.

Many aspects of Kurdish and Jewish cultures have become so intertwined that in several popular Jewish folk stories the Kurds are considered to be of Jewish origin. Some maintain that they are descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel, while others link the Kurds' origin with King Solomon, etc.⁸

The close ties between Kurds and the local Jews become evident in the more recent history, when in late 16th–early 17th centuries the Safavids deported several Kurdish tribes to Khorasan to reinforce Persian borders, and amongst them, a number of Kurdish Jews. Soon thereafter, there was established a small but active community. It is obvious that the Persians hoped that the resettlement of Kurdish Jews in Khorasan would facilitate the economic development of that region.⁹

The relative freedom of Kurdish women at that time led to the ordination of the first among the Kurdish Jews woman rabbi, Rabbi Asenath Barzani, in the 17th century. She was the daughter of the celebrated Rabbi Samuel Barzani (ca. 1630) who founded many religious schools and seminaries in the Kurdish-speaking areas. Eventually, Asenath became the head of an academy at Mosul.¹⁰

The legendary tombs of Biblical prophets, such as Nahum in Ali-kush, Jonah in Nabi Yunus (ancient Nineveh), Daniel in Kirkuk, Habakkuk in Tuisirkan, and Queen Esther and Mordechai in Hamadan, until today venerated by Jews, are located in the vast regions inhabited by Kurds.

⁷ See I. Garbell, *The Jewish New-Aramaic Dialect of Persian Azerbaijan: Linguistic Analysis and Folkloristic Texts*, The Hague, 1965.

⁸ E. Brauer, *The Jews of Kurdistan* (Completed and edited by R. Patai), Wayne State University Press, 1993: 50.

⁹ M Galletti, *op. cit.* : 44.

¹⁰ Jewish Telegraph Agency, 7 April 2003.

The urban Jews excelled in crafts: jewellery, carpentry, leather tanning, and timber rafting, women being engaged in carpet weaving and wool spinning. The Jews in rural regions had vineyards, grew crops and tobacco, and, unlike the Jewry of other regions, also herded livestock.¹¹ Further to the East, artisans and agrarians gradually gave way to tradesmen. In the mid-20th century the preponderance of tradesmen over craftsmen is especially conspicuous in the eastern parts of the Kurdish-speaking areas. As Brauer has shown in his book, "out of 300 Jewish heads of households in Urmia, 120 are shopkeepers and 100 are peddlers. In Kerkuk there are no craftsmen whatever: all the Jews are tradesmen. In Amadiya, the tradesmen (especially the peddlers) were formerly in the majority..."¹²

Some estimates have the total number of Kurdish Jews by the mid 20th century at 40,000-50,000, but this data varies in different sources. Some Israeli sources maintain—mainly based on Iraqi statistics—that by 1947 in Northern Iraq, there were 3,109 Jews in the Erbil province, 4,042 in Kirkuk, 10,345 in Mosul, 2,271 in Sulaymania, and 2,851 in the Diyala province. In all, in the Kurdish-populated areas of Iraq there lived 22,618 Jews.¹³

Since approximately the 16th century, Palestine had already a permanent Jewish community. The "immigration of Kurdish Jews to Palestine began in the 16th century and was directed to Safed in the Galilee, which at the time was the most important Kabbalistic centre".¹⁴ For the next three hundred years, there is virtually no data on the migration of Jewish Kurds to Palestine. Later on, between 1900 and 1926, about 1,900 Kurdish Jews emigrated to Palestine, and by 1935, another 2,500.¹⁵

Notably, following World War I and the post-war events, a small group of Kurdish Jews (along with other Northern Iraqi peoples, like Assyrians, Kurds, and Yezidis) has settled down in the suburbs of Tbilisi in the Georgian Soviet Republic. When referring to them, the locals used the word *laklouxh*, the origin of which is unknown. The Jews called themselves *Srel*, from *Israel*. Some of them left the USSR in the mid 1930s and via Turkey moved to Palestine. The greater part of them stayed, and in 1951 was deported to eastern Kazakhstan. A few years after Stalin's death, following the rehabilitation, these Jews had

¹¹ E. Brauer, *op. cit.*: 205-220.

¹² *Ibid.*: 212.

¹³ R. Patai, "Preface", in Brauer, *op. cit.*: 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

progressively immigrated to Israel, leaving behind just a tiny community. By the 1980s there had been no more than 2,000 Kurdish Jews left in the Soviet Union (mostly in Tbilisi and Alma-Ata).¹⁶



A Kurdish Jew female
(Susan Meiselas, *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History*,
Random House, 1997: 39)

Since the 1920s, *Alliance Israelite Universelle* has been opening schools in Kurdish-populated regions (in Sanne in 1903, in Kirmanshah in 1904, in Mosul in 1907, and in Khanekin in 1911), and introducing many educational programmes specially designed for Kurdish Jews.¹⁷ These measures involved non-Jewish population as well, as a result of which a large stratum of educated people emerged among the peoples inhabiting these areas. These activities had continued up until the establishment of the State of Israel.

Since the age of Ottoman domination, the Iraqi Jews, especially in the central parts of the country, have been prominent in the economic, cultural and political life of Iraq. After Great Britain had formally granted Iraq independence in 1932, the Iraqi Jews retained their privileged status. Under King Feisal's rule they played an important role in the country's business and many of them held high-ranking positions in the government. The earliest expressions of anti-Semitism in Iraq were registered in the late 1930s, when the German agents operating inside the country had provoked pro-Nazi sentiments.¹⁸

¹⁶ L. Minc, *Kto takie lakluxi?* (www.jewish.ru/history/jeworld/9012.asp).

¹⁷ Brauer, *op. cit.*: 48.

¹⁸ H. M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, New York, 2000: 398-399.

Israel and the Kurds after the Establishment of the State of Israel

Since the so called Palestinian War or the Israeli War for Independence of 1948-1949, Jews had become subjects of brutal persecution by the Arab government; many Jewish students were expelled from universities; Jews were laid off *en masse* and many arrested. Having found themselves in a difficult economic situation, the Jews started leaving the country. As emigration was prohibited, their first waves were smuggled across the border, and although in March of 1950 the Iraqi Parliament legalised the emigration to Israel, many Iraqi Jews had to leave without most of their possessions.¹⁹

As a result, between 1948 and 1952 a large amount of Kurdish and Iraqi Jews left Iraq and resettled in the newly-founded State of Israel. There, however, they preserved their lifestyle by retaining the Kurdish language and culture, celebrating Kurdish holidays, such as Novroz, organising folk festivals and publishing periodicals in Kurdish, being thus an isolated community. The deliverance of the Iraqi Jewry, in the words of a survivor of the escape, “could be considered not only as a glorious chapter in the annals of Zionism, but also as a demonstration of the potency of the Zionist idea”.²⁰

The fact that almost the entire Jewish community of Iraq (between 120,000 and 130,000, according to various estimates), one of the oldest in the Diaspora—if not the most ancient—left the country and emigrated to Israel, first illegally, and only later as an officially sanctioned migration, can be rationalised by a combination of several factors: the idea of Zionism, bolstered by the establishment of the State of Israel on the one hand, the persecution and feeling of insecurity that beset the Jewish community in Iraq since the beginning of the Arab-Jewish war, on the other. Only some five thousand Jews for a variety of reasons opted not to leave Iraq—and its northern Kurdish-populated areas—and move to Israel. However, following a backlash caused by the outcome of the Six Day War in 1969, most of the remaining community, through exit routes operated by Iraqi Kurds, left the country.²¹ The sizeable Jewish community of Zakho, for example, had virtually all but disappeared, with the exception of a few wealthy

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Maurice Shohet, *The Escape From Iraq—A Personal Account* (<http://thesite2000.virtuallave.net/iraqijews/escape.html>).

²¹ *Ibid.*

local Jews who preferred conversion to Islam to the escape to Israel and the ensuing loss of property.²²

One of the most problematic issues during the emigrations process was transportation. Initially, the Jewish Agency had planned to ship them by sea from Basra to the Israeli port of Eilat. The plan, however, could not be implemented due to the official state of war between Israel and Iraq, and also the blockade of the Strait of Tiran by Egypt. The Iraqi government had, nonetheless, agreed to sanction airborne migration of Iraqi Jews on the condition that they will not flow directly to Israel. As a result of the massive airlift code-named Operation Ali Baba, between May 1950 and December 1951, about 113,000 Jews moved to Israel via the neutral Cyprus. Some Kurdish Jews from Kurdish-populated areas left Iraq via Iran and Turkey. The overall number of Jewish immigrants from Iraq was about 121,000.²³

In Israel, the Kurdish and Iraqi Jews encountered numerous problems and difficulties. In addition to the natural challenges of adapting to life in a new country, dozens of thousands of people who had been uprooted from their familiar surroundings, lost their jobs and their property, were faced with the issue of fitting in with local groups of various cultural backgrounds. The so-called European or Ashkenazi Jews historically made up for the majority of the Jewish Diaspora all over the world. Even after most of the European Jews had been massacred in the Holocaust, Ashkenazis (and their descendents throughout the world) still outnumbered all the other tribes of Israel. It was the Ashkenazi Jews who, upon the creation of the State of Israel, formed the core of the population. They essentially ran the newly established state, including the political, cultural and social aspects of it.

There has always been rivalry between Ashkenazis and all other Jews, especially the so-called Oriental Jews, stemming from linguistic and cultural differences, as well as distinctions in the perception of their national and social identity. This holds especially true for the Iraqi and Kurdish Jews who, as direct descendents of the ancient Jewish Diaspora, have been historically considered to be a cut above the rest of the Diaspora groups in terms of education, culture, and affluence. Iraqi Jews, who had been used to considering themselves aristocrats, found it hard to come to terms with almost total Ashkenazi domination in the newly founded state, being reduced to the status of second-rate citizens. They were ridiculed and ostracised for what other

²² Galletti, *op. cit.* : 45.

²³ Sachar, *op. cit.* : 399.

Jews viewed as unsophisticated manners, “country cousin” dialect and provincial lifestyle. More important, however, was the fact that Kurdish Jews had been more tolerant towards Muslims to the extent that even mixed marriages were allowed.

Even after decades of living in Israel, Kurdish Jews retained strong nostalgic feeling for their old country. One of the most recent examples of that is the documentary *Forget Baghdad* released in Israel in late 2003. In his 111 minute long film, the Swiss-raised filmmaker Samir, who was born in Iraq from a Jewish mother and a Shi‘a Muslim father, tells a story of lives of four Kurdish Jews living in Israel but still connected with their language, culture and traditions. The film offers a glimpse into complex identity issues of the large Mizrahim (the term referring to Oriental Jews) community in a country basically run by Ashkenazi Jews. While the documentary’s overall focus is on a sense of nostalgia for the past and cultural alienation of Kurdish Jews in modern Israel, part of the film is devoted to the work of Ella Habiba Shohat, an Israeli film scholar who lives and works in New York, and analyses the stereotypes of Mizrahim in modern Israeli cinema. Her book “Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation” (1989), aims to address that particular issue.²⁴

As Israel’s primary information source and the knowledge base on Kurdish issues in the entire area, Kurdish Jews always shaped Israel’s policies on Kurds. Probably nowhere in the world—including other countries in the region—is the Kurdish ethno-political factor subject to such scrutiny and political planning as in Israel. There is little doubt that among the factors contributing to that is the existence of the large Kurdish Jewish community in Israel.

A new chapter in the relations between Kurds and Jews opened in the mid 1960s, when a series of armed clashes between Kurds and Iraqi troops began breaking out in the Kurdish-populated territories of Northern Iraq. Not only did these clashes evolve into open guerrilla warfare, but they also spilled into the neighbouring Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Some historians maintain that the Soviet Union was one of the masterminds behind the Kurds’ uprising in the mid-sixties.

When in the mid-1940s, the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in north-western Iran was destroyed, most of its leaders were killed. Only one of them, Mula Mustafa Barzani with two thousand fighters managed to break through the Iranian border and take refuge

²⁴ S. Holden, “Born in Iraq, Living in Israel, Pondering Issues of Identity, ‘Forget Baghdad’, Movie Review”, *The New York Times*, 5 December 2003.

in Soviet Azerbaijan. There he was met with a friendly welcome, and instead of internment the fugitives were officially given political asylum. Barzani's luck ran out, however, in 1952, when on Stalin's order the Kurdish refugees were all deported to the remote Uzbekistan and resettled outside of Tashkent. There the Kurds were organised into a *kolkhoz*, and the regional military range nearby was transformed into a saboteur training camp for young Kurds. Some 100 Kurds were enrolled in the Tashkent military school where they formed a special regiment and were trained to lead small commando units. Mustafa Barzani and several senior field commanders, who had learned Russian, were sent to study at special courses at the Frunze Military Academy.

In 1957, the Kurdish refugees who had undergone training in Tashkent and Chirchik, formed a commando brigade and under the command of Mustafa Bazarzani were secretly deployed in the Kurdish-populated areas of Iraq. Out of this brigade came the core of field commanders who later on distinguished themselves in a number of Kurdish uprisings in Iraq and elsewhere.²⁵



The new arrivals from Northern Iraq
A Kurdish Jewish family in the Lydda (Ben-Gurion) airport, Tel Aviv
(Susan Meiselas, *ibid.*: 197)

²⁵ M. Štejnberg, "Narod bez strany", *Nezavisimoje voennoe obozrenie*, 28.11.2003.

The initial success of the Iraqi Kurds' uprisings against Baghdad's government had caught the attention of the Israeli intelligence, which viewed them as potentially valuable allies in their fight against Arab regimes in Syria and, especially, Iraq, two most determined enemies of Israel in the Middle East. In the late 1950s, based on that rationale, the Jewish State's policy towards Kurdish minorities of the Arab states in the Middle East started revealing certain elements soon to be known as the "Peripheral Strategy".

"Peripheral Strategy" and the Role of the Kurds in the Israeli Geo-strategy in the Near and Middle East.

The national security strategy of the Jewish State has traditionally been based on two essential tenets. The first one is "Determinism", assuming the support to Israel by a leading superpower, while the second crucial tenet is the "Peripheral Strategy" of security cooperation with the non-Arab regional powers.²⁶ It should be noted, however, that the fundamental principles of the so-called "Peripheral Strategy" were established by the ideologues of Zionism long before the State of Israel was even created. Similarly, political contacts between various Jewish and Zionist organisations with the Kurds date back to the 1930s.

As early as in 1904, Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism, said that the area of the Jewish State to be created on the Promised Land must stretch "from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates" (Complete Diaries, vol. II: 711). Rabbi Fischmann, member of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, declared in his testimony to the U.N. Special Committee of Enquiry on 9 July 1947: "The Promised Land extends from the River of Egypt up to the Euphrates; it includes parts of Syria and Lebanon". The Kurds have always been featured in Zionist thinkers' plans on the Middle East. After the Jewish State had been established, the Kurdish ethnic conglomerate, divided between Iran, Turkey, and Israel's two sworn enemies, Syria and Iraq, was paid extra attention.²⁷

Dr. Saleh Abdel Jawwad, a Professor of political science at Beir Zeit University in the West Bank, is one of many Arab analysts, who

²⁶ S. Minasian, "The Turkish-Israeli Military and Political Co-operation and Regional Security Issues", *Iran and the Caucasus*, vol. 7 (2003): 309.

²⁷ See especially O. Yinon, "A Strategy for Israel in the Nineteen Eighties. The Zionist Plan for the Middle East", (Translated and edited by Israel Shahak), *Association of Arab-American University Graduates, Inc., Belmont, Massachusetts, Special Document N.1*, 1982; idem, "Stratégie pour Israël dans les années 80", *Revue des Études Palestiniennes*, N.5, 1982: 73-83.

maintain that already by the end of the 1930s, Ben Gurion articulated some principles, which have become indisputable Zionist tenets in Israel's Middle Eastern policy:

1. The Arabs are the primary enemy of the Zionist movement. To confront this chief enemy, it is necessary for Zionism to search for allies in the East and to stand with its allies in the West. Therefore, any group, organisation, or ethnic element, f opposes Arab nationalism—"the primary enemy of the Jewish people"—or is prepared to fight against it, is an ally, which helps Zionism implement its state-driven policies.

2. The Jewish people, who have been subjected to the terrorism and oppression of various governments, and particularly those who lived in Arab countries, perceive all minorities and groups "oppressed" by the Arabs or Muslims as allies and partners.²⁸

These two principles formed the basis of what is known as the "Peripheral Strategy" or the "Theory of Allying the Periphery". After the establishment of the State of Israel, Ben Gurion tried to expand this strategy. He focused his attention on forming an opposition alliance by building strategic partnerships with Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia (Encirclement Theory). And, although these partnerships were designed to undermine Syria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Egypt, the ultimate target of that policy was Iraq. It was for the purpose of reducing or eliminating threats emanating from Iraq, that Israel had covertly established quite close contacts with the leaders of the Kurdish movement. In sharp contrast with these relationships, Israel failed to create similar connections with Egypt's Coptic community, first and foremost because of the historical continuity of the Egyptian state.²⁹

Admittedly, in the late 1940s, right after the establishment of Israel, its leadership was a little apprehensive about supporting regional ethnic and religious minorities, primarily out of concern that the newborn state did not yet have enough vitality to afford that. An interesting doctrine formulated by the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1948 serves to demonstrate Israel's policy on ethnic minorities (in this case, the Kurds) in Arab countries. The following quote reflects on some of the pet ideas of the Israeli leadership of that time: "In principle, we consider ourselves barred from disseminating propaganda, [inciting]

²⁸ Saleh Abdel Jawwad, "Israel: The Ultimate Winner" (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/>).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

revolt, or any other overly potent propaganda, because... we have not yet burned all our bridges with the Arab majority in the East".³⁰

Active contacts between Jewish organisations and the Kurds date back to the late 1930s. The contacts were initiated by the Zionist intelligence operative Rubin Shiluah, one of the main authors of the "Peripheral Strategy". Shiluah, who lived in Baghdad at that time, organised an intelligence network and established relationships in the mountainous Kurdish areas in Northern Iraq. The relationships he formed with the Kurds there towards the end of the 1940s had later become instrumental in helping Iraqi Jews reach Palestine from Northern Iraq via Turkey and Iran.

By the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, Israel became the primary source of arms and military training for the Kurds in their fight against the Iraqi central government. While full details have yet to be revealed, various sources claim that thousands of Mossad agents and Israeli military personnel were located throughout Northern Iraq under different guise (military advisors, agricultural experts, trainers, doctors, and humanitarian mission personnel).³¹

Reports on Mossad's operations in Iraq and their support of the Kurds have often leaked to the regional and international press. According to the renegade former Mossad agent Victor Ostrovsky, whose books shed light on some previously classified pages of the Israeli intelligence history, Mossad also liberally used volunteer agents from Amnesty International and other humanitarian organisations. Mossad applied all possible elements of psychological and information warfare and did not shy away from engaging their Iraqi agents in special acts of sabotage, in one of which an Iraqi explosives plant was blown up, and, in another, Iraqi security agents were destroyed.³²

Between 1965 and 1975, Israel continued supplying Iraqi Kurds with different kinds of weapons.³³ Mossad also helped the Kurdish Democratic Party to set up its intelligence-gathering group known as Parastin, in the late 1960s. One of the reasons why Israeli intelligence operations in the north of Iraq were extremely important for Israel was that in their fight against Kurdish rebels the forces of the Iraqi central government—or, rather, those of the Baath Party—were

³⁰ A. Nachmani, *Israel, Turkey and Greece: Uneasy Relations in the East Mediterranean*, London, 1987: 15.

³¹ Saleh Abdel Jawwad, *op. cit.*

³² See in detail V. Ostrovsky, *By Way of Deception*, Toronto: Stoddart, 1990.

³³ D. McDowall, "A Modern History of the Kurds", Bridgend, 1996: 320, 331; N. Mordechai, "Minorities in the Middle East", Jefferson, 1991: 240-241.

joined by the regular troops of another Arab state run by the same Baath party, Syria. When on June 10 1963, Baghdad started a military drive against Kurds in Northern Iraq, Syria, alarmed with the prospects of the separatism spreading at home, expressly offered Baghdad help to fight Kurdish rebels led by Mula Mustafa Barzani. Syria's Prime Minister Salah ad-Din Bitar said: "Syria makes all its armed forces available to the government of Iraq in its fight against the Kurds". Syrian troops were deployed and, reinforced with air force and heavy artillery, began hostilities against the Kurds in Mosul, Zakho, and Dohuk.

Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq had been arranging for the two states to merge into one, and in October of 1963, a military alliance treaty providing for the creation of joint armed forces was signed in Damascus. The Iraqi Defence Minister, First General Saleh Mahdi Ammash, was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the joint Syrian-Iraqi forces. However, after the efforts to unify Iraq and Syria had failed, the Syrian forces met with fierce Kurdish resistance in the north, and were withdrawn from the Kurdish populated areas.³⁴ It is noteworthy that, as a result of Israel's support for the Iraqi Kurds, large contingents of the Syrian army were pulled out from the Israeli border. Meanwhile, the Iraqi regular army's engagement in suppressing the Kurdish revolt got in the way of Iraq's participation in the October 1973 war against Israel, as it required the withdrawal of its forces from the internal front in Kurdistan, as well as the Iranian front. Professor Ofra Bengio, an Iraqi scholar at Tel Aviv University gives the following description of Israel's support for the Iraqi Kurds: "Although limited in time and place, this support introduced the theory of the American-Israeli-Iranian conspiracy against Iraq. It proved to Iraq that although it had no common border with Israel, it could pay a price for involvement in the conflict, and finally it inserted a strong bilateral element into the general Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel's support to the Kurds was perceived as threatening the very sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Iraqi state. For Iraq this support was no less than an attempt to establish a 'second Israel' in the Northern Iraq".³⁵

As early as the late 1950s, Mossad and other Israeli intelligence agencies worked together with the CIA to establish the Shah's secret police, SAVAK. Close cooperation between the Israeli, American, and

³⁴ N. T. Čalymyan, *Sirjisko-irakskie otnoŝeniya 1961-1967gg.*, Erevan, 2002: 64-76.

³⁵ O. Bengio, "Crossing the Rubicon: Iraq and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2, N.1 (March 1998): 33-34. For more details, see idem, "The Kurdish Revolt in Iraq", *Tel Aviv Hakibutz Hameuhad*, 1989: 83-87.

Iranian intelligence establishments became vividly clear in their support of Kurdish rebels fighting against the central Iraqi government in Northern Iraq. The collaboration ended in 1975 when Iran withdrew his support following the so-called Algerian Treaty it had signed with Iraq in an attempt to improve relations between the two states.³⁶ A 1979 CIA report on Mossad notes: "The main purpose of the Israeli relationship with Iran was the development of a pro-Israeli and anti-Arab policy on the part of Iranian officials. Mossad has engaged in joint operations with SAVAK over the years since the late 1950s. Mossad aided SAVAK activities and supported the Kurds in Iraq. The Israelis also regularly transmitted to the Iranians intelligence reports on Egypt's activities in the Arab countries, trends and developments in Iraq, and Communist activities affecting Iran".³⁷

The Israeli military *attaché* in Tehran during the Shah's regime, Ya'acov Nimrodi played a central role in Israel's relationships with SAVAK, as well as in organising and maintaining contacts with the rebellious Kurdish tribesmen in Northern Iraq.³⁸

Members of the Israeli intelligence community and retired political figures still reminisce with pride about the 10 year long period when Israel secretly trained and armed Kurdish rebels in Northern Iraq to help them fight against the central Iraqi government. "We had a strategic interest to help the Kurds because Iraq was our enemy but we also viewed it as a humanitarian issue. We liked the Kurds", said Eliezer Tzafrir, a former senior figure in Israel's Mossad intelligence service. According to Tzafrir, Israel kept military advisers at the headquarters of the Iraqi Kurdish leader Mula Mustafa Barazani from 1965 to 1975, training the insurgents and supplying them with light arms, artillery and anti-aircraft guns. In return, Israel received, among other dividends, access to intelligence the rebels gathered on Baghdad. "They had good intelligence information on what was going on inside the Iraqi army, which they got from Kurds who served as officers and then switched to the side of the rebels", he told Reuters.³⁹ The United States also took part in the campaign.

Israel invested tens of millions of dollars in its support for the Kurds, supplying them by land from Iran, which had its own griev-

³⁶ R. W. Cottam, "Iran and the Middle East", *The Middle East and the Western Alliance*, ed. by S. L. Spiegel, University of California, Los Angeles, 1982: 211.

³⁷ J. Marshall, P. D. Scott, J. Hunter, *The Iran Contra Connection: Secret Teams and Covert Operations in the Reagan Era*, South End Press, 1987:169.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Reuters, February 21, 1999.

ances with Iraq and which had ties with the Jewish state until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. But at no time was the assistance extended to Kurds in Turkey or Iran, Tzafir said. He even described the PKK as “an unabashed terrorist group”.⁴⁰

It is plausible to conclude that the Israeli intelligence, thanks to its contacts with Kurdish sources and the former SAVAK agents, had obtained valuable location and identification data (although, aerial reconnaissance was more important in this particular case) for the Iraqi Tammuz-1 nuclear reactor at Osirak, which Israeli Air Forces bombed in June 1981.⁴¹

In 1996, the Israeli daily *Yediot Ahronot* published excerpts from the new book by the Israeli journalist Shlomo Nakdimon “A Hopeless Hope—The Rise and Fall of the Israeli-Kurdish Alliance”. The book, which gives accounts by many intelligence agents who at different times operated in Iraq, including the testimony by five former Mossad directors, sheds new light on many aspects of the Israeli Kurdish relations.⁴²

By the Algerian Treaty signed between Iran and Iraq in 1975, Baghdad made some territorial concessions to Iran, which, in turn, agreed to stop aid to the Kurdish uprising against the Iraqi government. Consequently, Israel could no longer use Iran’s land to deliver supplies to the Kurds of Northern Iraq. As a result, the uprising was brutally suppressed by the Baghdad government. It seemed that Israel’s assistance of Iraqi Kurds had stopped for good after the Iranian Revolution broke out in 1979.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the CIA and Mossad put their operations in the reverse order and now aimed their efforts against Iran from inside Kurdish-populated areas of Iraq (mostly Mossad) and Turkey. Kurdish-related papers from the former U.S. Embassy to Tehran document commando operations by the CIA and Mossad in the Kurdish-populated areas of Iran.⁴³

Israel, still in isolation by the circle of hostile Arab states, could not give up the idea of aiding Kurds, or other regional ethnic and religious minorities, for that matter. In February of 1982, the Israeli journalist

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ I. Fabričnikov, A. Frolov, “Kontrasprostranenie: xorošo zabytoe staroe”, *Yadernyy kontrol’*, N4 (70), vol.9, winter 2003: 143.

⁴² Payman Arabshahi, “Where Has Israel NOT Put Its Nose Into?”, *The Jordan Times*, 30.11.1996.

⁴³ O. Žigalina, “Dokumenty amerikanskogo posol’sstva v Tegerane po kurdskomu voprosu”, *Special’nyj byulleten’ Instituta Vostokovedeniya Akademii Nauk SSSR*, N.6(270), Moscow, 1990: 120-135.

and former *attaché* of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oded Yinon, published the article "A Strategy for Israel in Nineteen Eighties" (see footnote 27), which focuses mainly on the idea of the need for Israel to carry on the policy of undermining the Arab states of the Middle East, primarily by facilitating separatist movements of ethnic and religious minorities there.

Given that the author was a former Israeli diplomat, as well as that the paper was printed in a periodical published by such influential Jewish group as the World Zionist Organisation, it can be safely assumed that the concept of the "Peripheral Strategy" still dominated the minds of Israeli political elite, and even more so, the minds of the Jewish Diaspora, which has traditionally taken a more aggressive stance on Arab states of the Middle East.

Regarding Iraq and the Iraqi Kurds, Oded Yinon wrote: "Iraq, rich in oil on the one hand and internally torn on the other, is guaranteed as a candidate for Israel's targets. Its dissolution is even more important for us than that of Syria. Iraq is stronger than Syria. In the short run it is Iraqi power, which constitutes the greatest threat to Israel. An Iraqi-Iranian war will tear Iraq apart and cause its downfall at home even before it is able to organise a struggle on a wide front against us. Every kind of inter-Arab confrontation will assist us in the short run and will shorten the way to the more important aim of breaking up Iraq into denominations as in Syria and in Lebanon. In Iraq, a division into provinces along ethnic/religious lines as in Syria during Ottoman times is possible. So, three (or more) states will exist around the three major cities: Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, and Shi'ite areas in the south will separate from the Sunni and Kurdish north. It is possible that the present Iranian-Iraqi confrontation will deepen this polarisation" (*ibid.*).

Yinon's article caused quite an uproar in the Arab and the Western press alike and was a subject of great controversy in Israel itself. The recent U.S. war in Iraq has sparked new interest in the article with many analysts viewing it as a road plan to the fragmentation of the Arab Middle East as per Israeli scenario.⁴⁴

The special relationship between Israel and the Kurds became especially obvious during the operation of the U.S. led coalition against Iraq in 1991 in response to the occupation of Kuwait. Following the commencement of the active phase of Operation Desert Storm, the

⁴⁴ B. Vann, "A Proposal for Ethnic Cleansing in Iraq", *The New York Times*, 26 November 2003.

uprising of the Kurds in the north of Iraq and the Shi'a revolt in the south erupted at the same time, instigated and coordinated by the coalition. Both rebellions were brutally crushed by Iraqi government troops. Punitive measures against the Kurds of Northern Iraq, which followed, led to a critical humanitarian situation, as a result of which tens of thousands of Kurds had become refugees. Jewish organisations all over the world had mobilised their resources to collect aid for Iraqi Kurds, while their powerful lobbying groups tried to pressure their governments (especially in the U.S.) into forcing Iraq to stop its oppression of Kurds. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations accused the U.S. government of "demonstrating a shameful abdication of political and moral responsibility" by turning its back on the Kurds.⁴⁵ Israel manifested its sympathy for the Kurds by launching a massive relief operation and sending medical supplies, clothing and blankets to refugees along the Iraqi-Turkish border. The clothing collection campaign was organised mostly by the 100,000-strong community of Kurdish Jews in Israel. Israeli Kurds even demonstrated in front of the Prime Minister Shamir's Jerusalem office when he was meeting with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, calling on the American government to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussain.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The relationship between Israel and the Kurds between 1948 and 1990 played an important role in the global security policy of the Jewish state in the Near and Middle East, and in effect served to curb Iraq (and to a lesser degree, Syria) and to distract Baghdad from getting involved into the Arab-Israeli conflict. Also attributing to the Israeli-Kurdish closeness during the mentioned period were strong historical and cultural connections between the two nations, resulting largely from the existence of the large and strong Jewish Kurdish community in Iraq, rightfully considered as the oldest community in the entire Jewish Diaspora.

Despite the exodus of practically the entire Jewish population from Iraq in the period after the creation of the State of Israel, Iraqi Jews have retained their identity, culture, and traditions and have been effectively influencing Israel's policy on the Kurds, and, by extension, on

⁴⁵ A. Barron, "U.S. and Israeli Jews Express Support for Kurdish Refugees", *Washington Report of Middle East Affairs*, May-June 1991: 64.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. And the sizeable Kurdish community of Israel has played its distinct, albeit limited role.

Between the 1950s and the early 1980s, Israel in collaboration with the U.S. and the Shah's Iran provided comprehensive military and political assistance to Iraqi Kurds, which effectively kept the armed struggle of the Kurds against the Iraqi government going all that time. The signing of the Algerian Treaty between Iran and Iraq coupled with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 caused Tehran to withdraw its support for the Kurds in the north of Iraq and, consequently, limited Israel's—which does not have a common border with Iraq—ability to maintain its aid to the Kurds. As a result, the frequency and scope of Israeli-Kurdish contacts in military and political areas were dramatically reduced, which nonetheless did not diminish the significance of the Kurdish factor in Israel's global geo-strategy in the Near and Middle East.